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SOLDIERS' STORIES



PART ONE of a CONVERSATION WITH BLA VETERANS



It's very important for people to understand that, our radical tradition was how we organized a legal struggle, above-ground struggle with an extra-legal struggle underground. The same way the u.s. government has its Black Ops, and the c.i.a. has to carry out those things so that the government can plausibly deny that they had anything to do with. It's the same way with a people's movement. And you have to remember that the Black Panther Party had called the year before for a united front against fascism.

One of the things that Sekou and Blood, especially Blood had pointed out, is that there was the Black Panther Party of a different phase from 1966 to 1970, whatever. Sekou was talking about how it moved to the right and how they were moving to the right.

It's very important to understand the meaning of the Panther's move to the right after '71. What that really means is that, the Elaine Browns, the David Hilliards were more than just moving to the right in terms of his politics. David Hilliard was probably in all likelihood a source of information for the f.b.i. The documents seem to indicate that, at least the documents I have in my possession, but that's another show.

This interview was conducted by Dr. Jared Ball, Kalonji Changa, and Kamau Franklin on May 23, 2021. Thomas "Blood" McCreary became an Ancestor on May 25, 2022. Sekou Odinga made his transition January 12, 2024.

Published in *Revolution in These Times: Black Panther Party Veteran Dhoruba Bin Wahad on Antifascism, Black Liberation, and a Culture of Resistance*, 2025

Cover art from the May 1974 issue of *Right On!*

people made some moves in Atlanta, it caused a big disruption. People had to scatter across the country.

The structure that I functioned under, we functioned as cells. We made decisions in those cells. We tried to contain it. We wanted it structured, but we didn't want it tight like that. As it turned out, a bank was being expropriated and two cells show up at the same motherfucking bank. We had to have it hooked up where we would have some type of information, what the fuck is going on, because we could get out of the shootout ourselves there.

It was things like that with loose structure, you needed some type of structure. In the beginning it was cool, but then it got outrageous, man. As I said, once you teach young people how to shoot them guns, they want to put it into action, and it wasn't time.

JT was trying to keep a tight rein on them, him being an older brother and have had some experience, and I think he did a good job out of all of his other flaws and shortcomings. That brother did a hell of a job, man, because remember, Sekou and Larry Mack, they were gone. They were in Algeria or Cuba or wherever they were at. He was trying to maintain shit, to keep it tight.

DHORUBA: When Blood says that, I don't want people to think that the BPP and the BLA went through different phases over the years. Initially because we did have an underground to the party when it was above ground, we always had brothers that functioned more or less in the background. G used to do that before he was brought up to deal with the LA chapter, but we did function as independent cells.

These independent cells, of course, had the same orientation as the BPP in terms of its politics and in terms of its enemy. They did have tactical initiative and tactical abilities to do what they had to do.

DR. JARED BALL: What's up, everybody? Welcome to this very special edition of Black Power Media's look at "A Soldier's Story" in the Black Liberation Army history. I'm Jared Ball here with my crew—Kalonji Jama Changa and Kamau Franklin.

Welcome to everybody. Especially, welcome to our very special guests, Sekou Odinga, Thomas "Blood" McCreary, and Dhoruba Bin Wahad.

DHORUBA: First of all, I want to thank you, Jared, and the Black Power Media, Kalonji, and Kamau, for keeping it real, and getting our story out to real radical tradition.

I want to talk about the Black Liberation Army, but I want Sekou to talk about some of the things, especially the international section of the Black Panther Party and the BLA, how we have the solidarity with the armed struggles of others in Afrika, like in Guinea Bissau and the Congo, as well as the Palestinians. This is the history that belongs to our people. Also, I want to mention how the BLA was part and parcel of the BPP's Ten Point program, especially when it came to military service. In the BPP program and platform it says that, "Citizens or members of the Black Panther Party will not be members of any other military army except the Black Liberation Army."

In 1971, COINTELPRO, the counter-intelligence program that was aimed at the BPP came to culmination. By this time, the counter-intelligence program had devoted over 70 percent of its activities towards the New Left, and over half of that was aimed at the BPP in particular. The idea behind the counter-intelligence program was not only to destroy the party, but also to discredit its leadership among the left both in the u.s. and globally in terms of our solidarity movement and our solidarity activities.

By 1971, Huey P. Newton and others believed that they were in

danger, that their lives were threatened. This came about as a result of a document that was released by the counter-intelligence program, claiming that the Panther 21 rejected the leadership of Huey P. Newton. That, in fact, he was no longer the leader of the revolutionary movements in the u.s. Huey P. Newton reacted to that. He purged the Panther 21. Much of it is in the documents, but members of the New York 21, myself included, Cetewayo Tabor, Sekou Odinga was already in Afrika. He managed to elude the dragnet that was put out to kill or capture him on April 1. He continued his work in North Afrika with the BPP's international section.

To the public, the split in the BPP came to light when Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver did a joint interview on a major television station, and the dispute spilled over to name-calling. The section that Sekou was in was purged from the BPP by Huey P. Newton and his cohorts in the Central Committee. Of course, those of us in the 21 who were out, were in danger of being setup and murdered, so we went underground.

It was the underground, the BLA, that came into notoriety on Malcolm X's birthday in 1971, May 19, when two armed agents of the state were shot. The New York City Police Department launched a campaign to go after the original members of the BPP and the Panther 21 who had been acquitted. This is all in the counter-intelligence documents.

Later, I want to talk about the politics of the BLA and why we thought of ourselves as necessary as the underground railroad was to the anti-slavery movement and runaway Afrikans. We were at war. We felt that our community was occupied by foreign entities, by the armed agents of the state who had no regard for our life and limb—which we still see regularly today. We felt that only with a political consequence we could convey to them the understanding that for us, for Black people in the u.s., democracy was not just an

common. I wasn't like an exception to some rule or something here. This was one of the reasons why we fail to realize that without our ability to control the armed agents of the state in our community, we are at the mercy of the state's law enforcement agencies. We have to control them; we have to control them by any means necessary. We have to understand the weaknesses of the enemy, that all politics is local.

JARED: Blood, I'd like to hear a little bit more to the extent you all find possible in this very public setting to talk about the transition from the Panthers to the BLA. How did that happen? What was that like? What of those stories, Blood, that you're talking about that we don't hear, can you share a little bit more of that you feel comfortable and appropriate in this space to share?

KAMAU: Can I add one question, too?

JARED: Sure.

KAMAU: One of the things that people who try to study the BLA talk about, is the structure. A lot of folks hear that the structure was not a "top-down structure" but a cell structure, where folks were given general descriptions of what was supposed to happen. Then, they carried out actions as they thought that they were supposed to do as related to those descriptions. As y'all talk about the development, could you also talk about, as you can, how did structure work for the union?

BLOOD: Let me say this. From my involvement, there was a brother out of Jamaica, Queens, named John Thomas. He took about seventeen kids to Atlanta, Georgia. They rented a farmhouse. In that farmhouse, they trained for months. People became better shooters. Their shit became structured and scientific. Like any young people, once you teach them how to shoot, and they're good on them targets, they get anxious, they want to make moves now. Some

The brother Victor Cumberbatch, who was with him, another comrade in the BLA managed to escape. They were treated by us in our underground hospital.

By the way, just to mention, for the sisters that always talk about Assata Shakur, she came from the same branch and the same chapter as Twymon Myers. Assata Shakur, though, she wasn't so much a soldier in the sense that Twymon was. She was running our medical facilities underground.

She was a soldier, everybody in the BLA had to have some skills in that respect, but she was a medical cadre. Of course, repression in the system brought us to the point where each one of us had to do a lot of different things. We had a saying that each revolutionary and each BLA member had to be a match for one hundred of the enemy.

We always study, we always try to perfect our techniques, and we always try to develop our political consciousness and understood that what we were doing was not something that everybody was cut out to do, that everybody in the movement couldn't do what we were doing.

Without this component to the movement, the enemy would never take our people seriously, they will continue to brutalize us, they will continue to murder us with impunity, they would never be brought to justice.

Therefore, we had to institute what we would call a revolutionary justice. We felt it was necessary, that when the enemies of the people murdered our people, murdered our children, that this had to have a political consequence, there had to be a consequence for this. We felt that this was necessary. That was my generation. That was how I felt, I grew up that way. It was nothing extraordinary about this, as you can tell about the Black Panther Party, it was obviously quite

empty word. That true democracy relied on a common sense of humanity. That until white supremacy and the white-supremacist organizations that oppressed us understood that, and until there was an equal distribution of the pain, there will be no democratic possibilities or dispensation in amerika.

Above ground, we talked about the Rainbow Coalition. We talked about bringing all working-class people and poor people and people of color together to form a third political party, to form a force that could be empowered. At the same time, we understood that violence is as amerikan as apple pie as H. Rap Brown, Jamil Al-Amin, said. Therefore, we understood that unless we were able to exact the consequence on the armed agents of the state and those who gave them their commands and orders, they will never consider us a human, they will never deal with us with justice and equality.

That was the basic thrust of the BLA. I really want to turn this over to Sekou, so he could talk about many of the things that the party did and delegations that we sent to the different parts of the world, different parts of Afrika. Many people don't even know that we had a delegation that went to North Korea when it was considered a hermit kingdom. I don't know. I believe Sekou went with the delegation, but Sekou could speak better about what was happening with the Black Panther Party internationally.

We were saving Sekou for the last, because that's the best of it, but he could get in here now. Turn this over to Sekou Odinga, my comrade, my brother, and someone I adore and respect immensely. Sekou, you got it, bro.

SEKOU: Power to the people. Free the land.

KALONJI: Power to the people. Free the land.

SEKOU: I think Dhoruba laid it out pretty clearly. The things that I

would have to add is what I was involved in particularly. In terms of what we were dealing with, the reasons for the existence of the BLA if you will, was a need for some kind of self-defense. Some sort of consequences to be applied to our enemies, because that occupying force that Dhoruba was talking about came in the uniform of the local police departments all over the country. They were, as they continue to do today, attacking us at will. Their doors were always open for white races to join them and to get their particular type of violence out against the Black community as today we see in Minneapolis with George Floyd and other places, we see these white folks in the police uniforms murdering our people.

We felt that there was a need for a consequence. But to follow Dhoruba's format, let me first say a little bit about the international section of the BPP. It really came about because the then-Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, had gone underground. He went to Cuba and that's where he first tried to start an international section of the BPP, but the Cubans had a different idea of what we should be doing. Their idea was that we should become part of the people and cut sugarcane. That didn't leave us much time to do the work that we wanted to do. We left Cuba and went to Algeria where we were welcomed with open arms.

The Algerian government was a revolutionary government at that time. When they heard what we wanted to do, they not only agreed to allow us to do it, they also agreed to help us do it by giving us a building. They gave us an embassy to work out of and a small stipend every month to help pay the bills, the electric bills, the gas bills, etc. They were very, very helpful and very instrumental in helping us build an international section.

At the time, they did this not only for the BPP, but they did it for all anti-colonial, anti-imperialist groups around the world. All the different Afrikan liberation struggles from South Afrika, from West Afrika, from Southeast Afrika, all of them were there. You had

study his history. He was the same age as Fred Hampton when Fred Hampton died. That brother, when they murdered him, EMS had to pry that nine-millimeter out of his hands. You know what I'm saying? That's how much commitment he had.

DHORUBA: Twymon Myers was a BLA soldier. He was also a community worker in the Black Panther Party before he went underground. He was from the Washington Heights branch of the Committee to Combat Fascism. In 1971, when we were forced underground after the Panther 21 conviction, Twymon Myers was one of the cadres in the BLA out of New York.

In many ways, Twymon was a very talented young brother in that he was a master at the craft of urban guerrilla warfare. He took to it like a duck to water, and he became legendary. He became someone who the NYPD feared and despised and wanted to kill. He escaped a number of ambushes where he was allegedly surrounded. This is stuff out of a Denzel Washington movie. Man, this young brother. He was not at all physically imposing. If you put glasses on him and a suit, you would think he was a nerd.

Twymon was from the South Bronx. He was from the city. He understood the streets. He understood how to move in the streets. He incorporated that because the BLA was quite territorial in the sense that we were from the hood. It was that we were familiar with our terrain better than the enemy was, better than they were.

Still, they managed to track Twymon. I think it was on 165th Street and Union Avenue in the Bronx. They trapped him one day and surrounded him. They found his safe house, they surrounded him, and they killed him. They gunned him down in the streets.

Twymon was one of many. There was Howard Russell, who was also killed in a confrontation with the police right around the corner from the Black Panther Party office, in fact.

from '66 up to '70, '71. They talk about 1981. It depends on who you're talking to.

To get the true history of the BPP, it must be told in sections. When the party was active; when it was functioning; and when it became inactive, because I've spoken to Panthers, and it seems like we were coming from two different organizations. It is imperative that you understand the history when people tell you they were in Party, what period are you talking about?

We don't know anything. We had liberation schools in New York, in Harlem and elsewhere, but that was our main focus. We had sickle cell anemia clinics. We had doctors coming in from NYU Medical School and Columbia, who were training people on Wednesday nights. They would turn the office into a clinic, put sheets up. They did their work.

What bothers me is that there's different parts of the party and different periods in time. Because for us in New York, the party only lasted for about three years. From '68 to '70, and in '71 the BLA took over. There was no Black Panther Party, or chapter, really functioning in New York City after '71.

The BLA was out there in the streets. Contrary to what people may think, police brutality decreased once they knew that there was going to be a consequence. That if you go and murder some kids out there, we're going to deal with your ass. If there's going to be wailing in the Black community, we're going to have some wailing in the police officer community. Let them know what pain is really all about.

I consider myself blessed because I've served with some people, man, some of the baddest motherfuckers that ever stepped out of history. I was honored to have been there. I'm going to give you one example, then I'm going to be quiet: Twymon Myers, you need to

MPLA there, you had ANC, you had FRELIMO, you had them all, including the PLO. We were all in Algeria, and we were all able to meet with each other openly whenever we wanted to.

We saw our mission over there as gathering information about the struggles going on around the world and getting information about our struggles in the u.s. out to the world. We also sought to build relationships that would help us in our different struggles around the world. In this regard, many of the progressive governments offered help, like the Chinese, Cuban, and obviously the Algerian governments. A number of other governments made it clear that they would help us on the down low, but they didn't want to have no open clash with the u.s.

Most of our help came from anti-colonial organizations. For me, I think I would say that the PLO at that time were our closest comrades. I did a lot of traveling with them myself. I went to the second Palestinian Students' symposium with Field Marshal DC where we delivered a major address of solidarity with the Palestinian people. I believe this was in 1971.

From there, the PLO offered us any aid that they could give us. As you know, they were a struggling anti-colonial organization themselves. They didn't have that much. Whatever they had, they opened their doors for any kind of training that they could give us, whether it be with arms, explosives, or whatever. They said, "We're here for you. Come, and we'll give you whatever we can." Some of us took them up on some of that. Basically, that's what we were doing in the international section. We were making contact with other anti-imperialists, anti-colonialists, and people who were struggling against the imperialists, the NATO gang led by the u.s.

Without the u.s. support, most of the brothers that were struggling around the world felt that they would be able to easily deal with the local yokels. We were able to make a lot of good contacts and a lot

of good coalitions with brothers out there. I traveled with the PLO a lot. I did some traveling through Lebanon, to Palestine, to a few other places. I went into Afrika, East Afrika, especially.

DHORUBA: Could I just interject something here, Sekou, for the audience. It's very important for people to understand what Sekou was saying about the enormous amount of respect the other liberation movements had for the Black Panther Party, and the Black radical movement in the united states. A lot of folks don't know that in this age of hashtag movements, this is not understood. International solidarity with the Palestinians, with the people in the Congo, with the people around the world was concrete. The NLF (North Vietnamese) offered us concrete assistance, the North Koreans, the revolutionary movements in Afrika. It is very important for people to understand that in this day and age with globalization and the u.s. as a new-age empire, the solidarity amongst oppressed people is of paramount importance.

Especially now, as empire begins to transition from fossil fuel to green energy, and the elite and the corporate states are now going to suffer or have to change the deal. Also because of the technological revolution that we're living through right now, with these communications and the weaponization of data. I think people really need to understand what Sekou was saying here, when he talked about all these liberation movements in Algeria at that time, and these liberation movements respected the BPP, and saw us and our people's struggle as one with theirs.

KALONJI: Quick question, Sekou. The time period you're talking about for clarity would be after the Panther 21 case?

SEKOU: Even before the 21 case was over. We started in 1970. We opened the international section of the BPP in 1970 around the summer.

BLOOD: There's one point that I want to make. When people study the history of the Panthers, you need to keep in mind which era of the BPP you're talking about. The BPP came into being in 1966, and from '66 to '71, I would consider it a revolutionary organization. After the killings started, we didn't touch on that. With the West Coast coming to New York and murdering people out there, we decided that we were going to take the fight to them, but dealing with each other.

That's when the BLA really went into full gear. The propaganda states that we were not known by the community. The community did not support us. That's bullshit. All you had to do after the action happened the night before, is go into any local bar, barber shop, hair salon, and the Black people in those places would be ranting and raving about those brothers and sisters the night before, how they took the fight to the enemy.

They say we were not a part of the Black community. We are a Black community. Where do you think we came from? You understand. We had no problems taking that fight to them, because under the conditions that we were living, especially in New York with them killing kids, throwing motherfuckers off the rooftop, we said, "We cannot go on any longer like that." People stepped up to the plate and started dealing with them. Then I want somebody to change. It's not egotistical.

DHORUBA: Oh, man, distinction to that.

BLOOD: When you took the fight to them, you found out they actually were cowards. They were actually cowards. When the gun battles went down, they weren't performing like they said they were performing, but that's another story. I think that the history of a party has to be understood. It was people in the BPP who came in certain periods in time. If you talk to a lot of people, they don't even know what we're talking about. They don't know that period

the Central Committee were moving to the right.

At that time, people didn't know that the assassination of Fred Hampton in Chicago and the arrest of the 21 and the purging of the 21 were designed to deal with the internal reconstruction of the Black Panther Party Central Committee that we had basically struggled with. Some of us had struggled when Huey got out of prison with the idea that the West Coast was the sole seat of all the leadership of the party, which was now national. They agreed, and we talked about how we would choose the new Central Committee.

One of the things that we understood was, like in the different chapters, like in LA with G, in Chicago with Fred, in Boston with the folks up there, the sister up there in Baltimore, in New York, there were certain brothers and sisters like Lumumba and Sekou himself, who were active in the Pan-Afrikan and Black Liberation Movement before they joined the party. They were activists in their respective cities before the party. When the party came to their location, they joined it because of its revolutionary and left nationalist politics, as Sekou was pointing out. From the perspective of the counter-intelligence program, this meant that if they let that type of leadership coalesce in the BPP, it would be terrible.

What they did, is that they made sure that Fred got killed. If you notice how Fred got killed, he got killed by an agent who worked for the f.b.i., the Black desk. If you notice how the Black Panther Party was, the 21 were arrested, and then later Bobby Seale was arrested because of a supposed kidnapping and murder that originated in New York as a consequence of the Panther 21 when they killed Alex Rackley in New Haven. We need to understand that COINTELPRO just didn't kill Fred because he could talk good, because he was charismatic. They went after us because we adhered to the revolutionary line, and those of us who were in New York were in those cadres that pursued the revolutionary agenda.

DHORUBA: In New York, right after we tried, remember when we tried the decentralization and community control stuff, Sekou and Blood back in '69. We started a solidarity committee in New York. The BPP chapter had a coordinating committee with other organizations and student groups in New York with the Palestinian students here in amerika. It was all connected and it was all part of the type of internationalism and anti-imperialism that the BPP exhibited at that time.

This was advanced for Black people. The only other organizations that saw our struggle in these terms was Malcolm X's at first and then actually the BPP, and then Martin Luther King, as we all know, came around to understanding imperialism and capitalism and war in the same manner that we had. Of course, he was assassinated. Yes, international solidarity is crucial to any movement for liberation today.

KAMAU FRANKLIN: We should bring Blood into the conversation. I think for folks who study the history of the Panthers and the BLA, folks get to know Dhoruba and Sekou because you guys have had cases that went public. I don't know a lot of people know Blood's history as much as they should. I was thinking about that the split in the party wasn't necessarily an East Coast-West Coast thing as was popularly portrayed. Can you touch on that a little bit too?

THOMAS "BLOOD" MCCREARY: Yeah. When the split went down, a lot of chapters were expelled around the country. It wasn't East and West Coast because San Francisco went with New York, LA went with New York, and you had other chapters throughout the country that went with New York, so it really wasn't a split. Even today, we still have strong solidarity, especially with the LA chapter.

I think that the COINTELPRO once again portrayed it as a split between the East and West Coast, but that was not the case. We

were always welcomed in LA. The LA chapter always welcomed us and many other chapters.

You've got to keep in mind when that so-called split happened, Huey and the rest of the Central Committee moved a lot of people from their locations and closed those chapters and moved them to Oakland. They were getting into politics, running for mayor, running for city councilmen, and that's where they were moving the party to.

Many of us were captured at that time. The BLA went into full swing to say really from '70 to '75. We got captured in '73. That's why I was telling Jared earlier, it's important that we understand that history because it's still portrayed as the East Coast-West Coast thing. As I said, that was not the case.

KAMAU: Would you say it's more of an ideological split?

BLOOD: It was ideological split. Also, it became a bloody confrontation. We lost a lot of people.

DHORUBA: Blood is absolutely right. It wasn't just the East-West dichotomy because a lot of people that came up in the rap game and tried to equivocate Tupac and Biggie, this East Coast-West Coast rivalry of some type of cultural tribalism that exists in the Black community. It's not the case.

Many of the Black people at that time in the BPP, when it first came into existence in 1966 on the West Coast with Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, many of the people who lived there, many of the families that lived there were newly migrated from Texas, from Louisiana, they came there during the war to work and to support the war effort at the piers and the docks.

The Black community in Los Angeles and San Francisco was not

as Afrocentric, you might say, much as and tied into the Afrikan experience, the Afrikan-Amerikan cultural experience in the North as New York and Chicago and Boston and Philly.

If you notice, Fred Hampton came from Chicago. It's very important to understand that one of the reasons why the New York chapter was portrayed that way, was because the New York chapter was one of the money cows of the BPP, especially after the 21 were arrested.

This was the basis for Lumumba and the brothers in prison believing that the West Coast Central Committee had abandoned them and therefore that discontent was recognized by the counter-intelligence program and used to ultimately split the party along the lines of, more of ideology and region than East Coast-West Coast, as Blood was pointing out.

SEKOU: Exactly. Ideologically, the Central Committee was clearly moving to the right and we were holding strong on the left. Blood just mentioned that now, they wanted to run for mayor, they wanted to run for city council. We were a revolutionary organization in our minds, and we continued from that mindset.

It was definitely ideological. We should make no mistake about that, this was not an East Coast-West Coast struggle. As Blood pointed out, a whole lot of those who were expelled by the West Coast Central Committee, were on the West Coast.

People like Geronimo Pratt, Donald Cox—Field Marshal DC—that whole crew, there was a whole lot of them over there that rode with the East Coast if you will, because of the ideological differences and they didn't believe that we needed to go into that type of politics.

DHORUBA: I think that it's very important for the audience to understand just what Sekou said. I haven't really put it in those terms before, but Sekou hit the nail on the head. Huey Newton and